

Interview with Leonie Sandercock^I

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MFP: Despite the fact that academics increasingly celebrate the politics of cultural difference in theory, the encounter with “the other” in the urban realm remains traumatic for many people around the world. What role can academics play to help the diverse actors involved –or not- in planning processes to deal with issues such as diversity, identity, and the rights to the city?

LS: Let me give you an example. Recently I received an invitation from an Italian Marie Curie fellow based in Poitiers, France. She is organizing a workshop on the invisibility of the immigrants in European cities and the failure of planners to actively create spaces that encourage immigrants’ presence in the public space. Although I won’t be able to attend that workshop she sent me her paper asking for my feedback. The paper focuses on the market of Piazza Esquilino in Rome, a public space where the presence of immigrants is highly visible and contested, and which has recently shifted into the military barracks. Starting the paper quoting Derrida’s understanding of hospitality, the Italian scholar did a very good job in framing the case study within the literature. And indeed, that paper would do very well in an academic setting. However, I said, the same paper would not play with planners. The professional practice still sees planning as culturally neutral, especially in Europe. Even though we increasingly recognize that planning is not gender neutral, there is not enough awareness of the cultural bias built into every aspect of planning. So, I said, depending on whom are you talking to, and what publics you want to reach, you need to change your language. When our language gets precious, when it is tied up with scholarly jargon, I don’t think we communicate well with

i. The interview took place at the UCLA Luskin School for Public Affairs on April 26, 2016.

non-academics. The tiny amount of overlapping among the ACSP and APA conferences is a case in point. The former is an academic event that gathers intellectuals and academics. The latter is mostly conceived for the professional world. There is very little conversation among the people who attend these conferences. I try to bridge the professional and academic realms with my work at the University of British Columbia. I teach an “Introduction to History and Theory” course at the master level. Each year the final assignment for my students is to shadow a planner for one day. First of all they have to decide who is a planner. And even this definition cannot be taken for granted. Planning is not only about city building, it’s about community building. This opens up a whole new field of actors and action. Understanding this, some of the students make fascinating choices and shadow unexpected actors. For instance, about a decade ago one of my students interviewed Kalle Lasn, the initiator of the *Adbusters* magazine, who also played a key role in the Occupy Wall street movement. The student studied the insurgent practice that Lasn put into action through his magazine, and how this can be seen as planning practice. These radical and anti-conventional forms of planning are what interest me the most at the moment.

I am very intrigued by what *actually happens* in cities and neighborhoods. The movie that Giovanni Attili and I made ‘Where Strangers become Neighbours: the story of the Collingwood Neighbourhood House and the integration of immigrants in Vancouver’ (National Film Board of Canada, 2007) is a case in point. The neighborhood we focused on became what it is now because of the engagement of the civil society. The action there was started and run by local residents, not by the state, not by the bureaucrats who run community centers. They developed their own mission about inclusion, and figured out their own ways of bringing people together to transcend cultural differences. In theoretical terms this actually translates into moving beyond the multicultural philosophy to the intercultural philosophy. That is, a theoretical shift from the pure recognition of difference to the celebration of it. And what does this mean in terms of policy?. If that translates into the encouragement of separate enclaves of different cultures in cities, then that’s not particularly healthy. Even if it doesn’t celebrate rather than deplore difference, clustering is still not creating inclusive spaces or society. That’s indeed the way in which some European cities have managed their growing diversity. Like the Netherlands, or Belgium. Countries

like France have literally marginalized difference at the fringes of cities. For all of the fine words that some of us have written about the multicultural city, we are not going to impact the people who are making the decisions about spatial management unless we speak in more persuasive terms, using both everyday language and creative ways. This is why for me is very important to encourage creativity. The way we write in our journals is not the way to communicate with the people who make decisions. So for instance, when my students shadow the planners, they often ask them what theories inform the professionals' work. And, of course, most times the planners have no answer for that question. Simply because that is not the right question to ask. Observing the actions of professionals will tell us what theory, philosophy, or ideology they implicitly refer to, and what power relations are in place. Ultimately, it is our responsibility to find effective ways of communicating with politicians and professionals on the national, city, and neighborhood level in the planning agencies. I think this must involve a shift in the language we use, and more creative forms of engagement.

Emotions --their traces, consequences, and narratives-- are crucial to your work. When portraying painful pasts, the risk of freezing memories in a melancholic frame becomes concrete. Do you see the production of nostalgia as a risk in your work? How do you deal with it?

This question makes me think of Howell Baum's article "Forgetting to Plan" (1999), which speaks of the agency of memory in community planning. I agree with him broadly. That is, I am convinced that in order to move from the present to the future we have to sometimes let go of an image of an idealized past. One that might have never existed, but it certainly exists in our mind, when we are threatened with change. Marshall Berman also wonderfully addresses these issues in "All that's Solid Melts into Air" (1988). There is always, he says, an internal contradiction between the nostalgic feelings for our own past, and the need to move on. So for instance Berman goes back to visit the Bronx, where he grew up. And he does that out of nostalgia. Yet he would never go back there to live. This is one of the many paradoxes of modernity, one that lies in our souls. It is a frictional movement inspired by the desire for change, the idea of progress that happens in the intimacy of our daily life, and

simultaneously the desire for things to stay the same. Particularly for those who come from a working class, those who have been liberated through education, like Berman and myself, we have no desire to go back to the old neighborhood and some of the values that we/they couldn't wait to get away from. In the end, as Baum says, we need to forget to move forward. As Peter Marris argues in "Loss and Change" (1974), grieving is a process. Only after you have elaborated painful events, you re-interpret them, you come to terms with the past. So for instance, Marris makes analogies between the structures of the grieving processes of individuals, and those of communities. And it is with the pasts of communities that planners have a chance to intervene.

Planners can -and have to- recognize the role of emotions in communities in order to facilitate a process of change. As my friend and social planner Wendy Sarkissian suggests, the notion of core story is key to manage grieving processes within communities. We all have narratives of our past, a core story that we tell ourselves that sometimes prevents us from moving forward. Just as individuals have to change their core stories to move ahead with their lives, so do communities. Wendy has worked extensively with communities of residents who felt abandoned or betrayed by institutions. Individuals who would resist change that they perceived as a threat. Those communities were stuck with their own core story. Planners can, and must, actively help the community members to reframe their own story, to change their narrative of themselves, and give them a sense of agency. Helping community members to feel part of the decision process is crucial. A good contemporary example of how planners can, or cannot, facilitate change is in the recent story of the City of Vancouver. Being only one of the 22 municipalities of the whole metropolitan area, the City is the economic engine of the whole municipality, hosting the creative hub, IT businesses, and the service industry. About ten years ago the Mayor and the City officials thought of responding to the growth needs of the metropolitan area through "eco-density", or densification in an ecological way. This concept referred to the implementation of public transportation, sustainability, densification around transportation nodes, and other unquestionably sensible and rational purposes. But the way in which the Mayor tried to implement this idea made the project fail. While in the 1990s the city of Vancouver had involved thousands of people in each community while operationalizing changeneighbourhood by

neighbourhood, this Major simply ignored the agency of people. He thought that this was the right way to proceed, he “simply” asked the planning officers for plans. When the residents of the low density neighborhoods realized that they would see high density urban fabrics growing close to their home they erupted, and made the plan fail. This was a real fiasco, one that I hadn’t seen in a long time. It symbolizes the end of 30 years of good planning. This tells us that change must be gradually brought into the community through dialogue.

A good city planning process includes participation with residents, explaining the consequences of change. Above all, there must be the negotiation of benefits for all the people who are going to be affected by change, not only, for instance, the owners of properties, but the renters too. That is the only way to facilitate change.

This issue of the Journal of Critical Planning is on resistance to extraction. Communities often resist extraction –of resources, housing, and jobs for instance. In so doing they challenge traditional paradigms of dominance, de facto creating alternative modalities of citizenship. What are your thoughts on resistance to extraction?

When I hear the word extraction I think of physical extraction. Canada and Australia are a good example of economies that highly rely on resource extraction. The devastation to both the landscape and the local inhabitants that resulted, and results, from extractions is a story that remain unfamiliar to too many Canadians. This is one of the true stories that I talked about in “Finding our way: beyond Canada’s apartheid” (Vancouver: Moving Images, 2010) the movie Giovanni Attili and I did looking at two First Nations. In 1952, one tribe was given 10 days to leave their reserve. The federal government had decided to prioritize the industrialization of the northern part of the province. Only one member of the tribe spoke English. Community members were promised housing and land. After walking 40 miles north to what for them was a foreign Country, they found out that nothing had been provided for them. Stories of forced relocation like this are so numerous, and unfortunately not only related to the past, the flooding of indigenous lands for instance is a current problem. The public energy utility in my Province, British Columbia, is right now building a mega hydro dam

for the Peace River. There are numerous First Nations whose land is going to be flooded, along with other settlers' ranches. Some people have been on hunger strike, or sitting outside of the BC Hydro office in Vancouver, but with little result so far. This is a good example of how public policies around resource and urban development have failed to address those who are 'in the way'. And this is what Marshall Berman's book is about. It is about how people who are in the way don't matter to public policy.

In the urban realm, the low income and marginalized communities are those who are the victims of environmental in-justice. We can help people to organize, to negotiate benefits. Organizing for resistance is really important because otherwise those people would get nothing. Above all, planners have to make choices about whether to support those communities and work with them as organizers of resistance. The best outcome that can be hoped for is that resistance stop processes which seemed unstoppable. Protests stopped freeway projects here in LA for instance. We know that a mobilized citizenry can turn around certain public policies. But not always. I wonder what will happen in Canada with the pipelines' development now that we have a more left-oriented government. For the last ten years the First Nations and other communities along the proposed route have opposed. They are mobilizing. Almost every house on Haida Gwaii, for instance, a First Nation I'm currently working with, has a "no pipelines" sign. Although in theory I agree that there should not be pipelines, the truth is that we don't live in that world. I hope that our Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his staff will find ways not to make those populations suffer. I think the best outcome would be that with more and more resistance the indigenous communities negotiate decent benefits, which in British Columbia we call "impact benefits agreement", IBAs. For centuries the settler society has taken advantage of everything, people, land, resources, everything. And the indigenous people got no benefits at all. They were confined to tiny reserves, seeing their resources being abused, and they never got anything out of that. So now they want partnership. They want to share benefits, and not just a tokenistic pretty little Indian logo. They want real equal partnership, jobs and training for their people for instance. And of course they want to negotiate around the environmental impact. And that means for instance identifying sacred sites or salmon-bearing streams and adjusting the pipelines' routes accordingly.

Not all resistance is going to win. But the next best thing to stopping something from happening is to negotiate the maximum possible benefits. And that's why mobilization and direct action is so important. When planners work for the state, they have a choice whether to implement what they are told to do -and they have some agency there of course- or to find another job, like working for the community, writing grants to support themselves while working with communities instead of against them. So the agency of the professional planner is really making decision on whom she or he is going to work for, and at what point to quit. I saw that myself in Australia in the 1970s when we had our first progressive government which really impacted land and urban policies. When that government changed to conservative, all of the young progressive planners who had moved to the national capital to work for the newly created "Department of Urban and Regional Development" no longer wanted to continue there. And the conservatives wanted to eliminate that department of radical urban policies anyway. So those young planners went to different cities, wherever there was a progressive regime. This is a good example of what being a planner means. It means to take risks and make difficult, principled choices. It means to facilitate change by helping people to organize resistance and negotiate benefits.